April 2012

Student-Counselor Development During the First Year: A Qualitative Exploration

Cornelia A. Patterson

Dana Heller Levitt
Montclair State University, levittd@mail.montclair.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.wcsu.edu/jcps

Recommended Citation

Patterson, C. A., & Levitt, D. H. (2012). Student-Counselor Development During the First Year: A Qualitative Exploration. *The Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision, 4*(1). Retrieved from http://repository.wcsu.edu/jcps/vol4/iss1/1

Student-Counselor Development During the First Year: A Qualitative Exploration

Abstract

This qualitative study examined the experiences of 9 first-year master's-level counseling students. Data revealed that students progressed through a constructivist sense making process in which previous experiences as well as personal expectations were used to make sense of their current experiences. A comprehensive—yet tentative—grounded theory based on in-depth interviews and a focus group is described. Implications for counselor education are provided.

Student-Counselor Development During the First Year: A Qualitative Exploration

Cornelia A. Patterson & Dana Heller Levitt

This qualitative study examined the experiences of 9 first-year master's-level counseling students. Data revealed that students progressed through a constructivist sense making process in which previous experiences as well as personal expectations were used to make sense of their current experiences. A comprehensive—yet tentative—grounded theory based on in-depth interviews and a focus group is described. Implications for counselor education are provided.

Keywords: Student-Counselor Development, First-Year Experience, Grounded Theory

Counselor educators and researchers alike have agreed that gaining insight into one's own progression as a counselor, during the training years and throughout one's own career, is a vital component of healthy counselor development (Donati & Watts, 2005; Lambie, Hagedorn, & Ieva, 2010; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Woodside, Oberman, Cole, & Carruth, 2007). It is important to identify and examine factors that influence student development because "overlooking these needs and issues can have significant implications for both counselors and the clients they serve" (Furr & Carroll, 2003, p. 39). While research has endorsed the need to examine student-counselor development, much of the literature is focused on counselor trainees at the practicum and internship levels and does not include the formative development that occurs within the first year. Researching formative development is important because if educators have an understanding of how first-year counseling students perceive information, they can use that information to tailor classroom activities to better suit the needs of the students. Ronnestad and Ladany (2006) stressed the need to more closely evaluate the training process as a whole while focusing on certain counseling skills and qualities. By examining counselors-in-training on an interpersonal and intrapersonal level, counselor educators can design appropriate educational experiences to facilitate healthy counselor growth (Furr & Carroll, 2003).

There is minimal literature that specifically explores first-year student-counselor development grounded in students' actual experiences. In a related study, Woodside et al. (2007) used a phenomenological approach to interview eight pre-practicum students about their experiences learning to be counselors. The authors explained seven themes: the journey, decision making, self-doubt, counseling is [sic], learning, boundaries, and differences. Stefano, Mann-Feder, and Gazzola (2010) utilized qualitative analysis of clients' written responses to participating in counseling with a beginning-level trainee counseling student and reported that the interpersonal qualities and skills of the beginning counselor were influential to the counseling experience.

The counseling literature has included research and insight into various elements that may influence counselor trainee development. Research has looked at

critical incidents in student development, theories of student learning, the role of reflection and how it influences the meaning associated with one's development, student cognitive development, and how counselor education pedagogy can be designed around the developmental level of students. Critical incidents refer to "significant learning moments, turning points, or moments of realization… identified as making a significant contribution to [one's] their professional growth" (Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006, p.88). Critical incidents have been examined in the context of student development (Furr & Carroll, 2003), during clinical practice (Howard et al., 2006), in multicultural training (Coleman, 2006), and overall counselor development (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Student learning theories help us understand how students learn and comprehend issues (Fong 1998; Granello, 2000; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998; Perry, 1970). To understand first-year student development, it is important to distinguish how theories of constructivism (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998), contextual learning (Granello, 2000), social-cognitive learning (Fong, 1998), and Perry's (1970) stage model of absolute thought to relativist thought have been applied to counselor education. In recent years, constructivism and experiential learning have been directly applied to student development (Burnett, Long, & Horne, 2005; Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2006; House, 2007). Reflection refers to "learning first to carry out smaller units of activity and then to string those units together in a whole design process; for the pieces tend to interact with one another and to derive their meaning and characters from the whole process in which they are embedded" (Schon, 1987, p. 158). Critical dialogue and reflection exercises allow the student to have an opportunity to discuss and reflect on one's role as a student, counselor-in-training, and as an individual

(Hoshmand, 2004; Woodside et al., 2007). Cognitive development and counselor pedagogy provide greater insight into the need for further exploration of the first-year experience.

Etringer, Hillerbrand, and Claiborn (1995) explored the transition as counseling students progressed from novice to expert counselors by reviewing literature in the development of expertise and found that entry level students most often possessed declarative memory structures that required information to be given in a factual manner as opposed to expert counselors who relied on procedural knowledge structures where information was categorized into relevant categories and could be more abstract in terms of delivery. Granello (2002) conducted comparable research on graduate student cognitive complexity and found that students regressed in their cognitive development when faced with new and unfamiliar tasks. Applying Perry's (1970) model to cognitive development in counseling students, Granello (2002) suggested that entry-level students integrated information in a very dualistic and dichotomous way and recommended that counselor educators attempt to push students to more multiplistic thinking. Brendel, Kolbert, and Foster (2002) evaluated the developmental effects of counselor training programs on both conceptual and moral reasoning levels and found that clinical work was influential in promoting students' cognitive complexity.

Counselor Education Pedagogy

Sexton (1998) stated that the literature lacks a description of the art and science of counselor education and that the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) sets forth the information that needs to be taught within counselor

education programs but does not provide information on the most effective methods of presenting the material. Moreover, Nelson and Neufeldt (1998) reviewed the counseling pedagogy literature and found that most research focused on teaching specific concepts such as client conceptualization, theoretical acquisition, and specific counseling problems. While techniques and strategies are discussed, there is minimal research examining the process by which classes are intentionally delivered to meet the students' developmental needs, perhaps because we do not have a clear sense of these needs.

Granello and Hazler (1998) examined the sequencing of classes to ascertain the developmental aspects of a counselor education curriculum. In reviewing multiple developmental models, the authors concluded that counselor education programs should work to adapt their curriculum and teaching styles to meet the developmental level of the students. Furthermore, they stated the primary limitation was that "little of this research has been conducted on graduate students in counselor education" (Granello & Hazler, 1998, p.103). Given that development is one of the fundamental elements of the counseling profession, it is important to understand that development from the beginning of training. Unfortunately, there is little research to date that explores the early developmental processes for counselor trainees. A deeper understanding of the first-year experience can not only assist in increasing awareness of students' developmental needs but can also help counselor educators in designing and implementing curricula that align to those developmental needs (Granello & Hazler, 1998).

Our understanding of these developmental processes is limited to a broad categorization of the counselor trainee experience as it relates to overall development. While many studies included information about students during the first year, the research tends to focus on counselor trainees throughout their academic program and/or throughout their professional career and does not provide adequate understanding of the influence of the first year on one's development.

The purpose of this study, then, was to utilize grounded theory methodology to specifically look at student development within the context of the first year. Grounded theory methodology was most appropriate for this inquiry because it enabled the exploration and description of the context and setting while searching for a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Understanding the first-year experience may help counselor educators to develop curricular experiences to meet the needs of students as they enter their training, and assist students to understand the challenges that they are experiencing as more normative in nature.

Method and Procedure

As a result of the lack of research specifically with first-year master's students, a tentative theory, grounded in the experiences of the students, was an essential goal of this study. This grounded theory not only increases the knowledge base of student-counselor development, it has the ability to advise pedagogical techniques that are intentionally designed to match students' developmental levels. Furthermore, the grounded theory may serve as a catalyst for future research into student-counselor development.

Sampling Procedure, Setting, and Sample

Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, two rounds of in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher with nine first-year master's degree students from three Midwestern CACREP-accredited counseling programs. The primary author contacted the department chair at each university and requested a list of first-year students who they believed would be able to clearly articulate their experiences. The first interviews took place in early to mid-winter and the second interviews in early to mid-spring of the same year at each of the universities. All nine participants who were individually interviewed were females ranging in age from 23-37 years. Eight participants were Caucasian and one was Mexican-American; three went directly from undergraduate to graduate school while the other six had waited between 1-15 years before they entered the program. Six of the participants were school counseling students and the other three were on a clinical mental health counseling track.

In-depth interviews took place in the natural setting of each counseling program's university and each interview was recorded and transcribed by the primary author. A focus group was conducted after both rounds of interviews. The focus group was composed of six students from one university who volunteered to participate, of which two were involved in the initial round of interviews. This focus group gave students an opportunity to check the tentative theory for thoroughness and accuracy.

Data Collection and Analysis Process

Two rounds of in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. Initial interview questions were (a) "Describe your thoughts, feelings, and perceptions as a first-year counseling graduate student," (b) "What is it like being a first-year student in a counseling program?" (c) "What were your assumptions regarding being in a counseling program?" and (d) "What has been the most influential event or incident so far in your first year as a counseling student?" Analysis of the data was ongoing through the data collection phases.

Consistent with grounded theory data analysis procedures, the data from the first round of interviews were initially open coded. Open coding is the process that allows for the initial identification and categorization of concepts that emerge from data (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). Following the open coding process, the researcher engaged in axial coding to reassemble the data and to further develop the initial categories that emerged during the open coding process. During this time the researcher also compared the categories at the level of their properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 2007).

Following the first round of interviews, four major themes began to emerge from the analysis: various influences on the students during their first-year experience, the personal meaning that was attributed to their experiences, the way in which students conceptualized knowledge, and how the students appraised their competence as emerging counselors. Using the same students from the first round in the second round, the next set of interview questions were designed to gather more in-depth information and meaning within each category. They included (a) "How have you come to understand what it means to be a counselor?" (b) "How did the time in which you decided to enter graduate school affect your experience during the first year?" (c) "What did you expect of yourself as a first-year counseling student?" and (d) "What have been the best aspects of your program and what do you believe needs improvement?"

Axial coding revealed that participants' descriptions supported the relationships between the four conceptual categories through their respective properties and dimensions. Axial coding also allowed the researcher to re-conceptualize some properties to more accurately describe the themes. Next, selective coding was employed to enable the integration of the students' responses in terms of the categories, properties, and dimensions derived in the previous steps and to refine the emerging theory from the relationships found in the earlier analyses (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). Finally, a conditional matrix was used to integrate the categories, properties, and dimensions of the data and create a diagram which illustrated how the themes were incorporated into the grounded theory.

Researcher, Researcher Bias and Triangulation Procedures

In qualitative research, the researcher is an integral component of the research and is the instrument for data collection and analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Creswell (2006) stressed the importance of identifying and bracketing researcher bias to avoid a priori assumptions which may skew the analysis of the data. The researcher identified the following assumptions: (a) first-year counseling students may experience a period of change in which they realize that the program is different than what they had expected, (b) the first year in a counseling program is influential in counselor development, and (c) students are affected by the use of different pedagogical techniques that may be new to them. Throughout the research process, the author strived to bracket these assumptions to preserve the credibility of the data and employed several credibility and triangulation techniques.

To further increase the credibility of these research findings, the researcher utilized data, investigator, and theory triangulation. Data triangulation included interviewing students in different programs at different geographic locations. Investigator triangulation occurred by consulting with several faculty members during the coding processes in order to compare and check the data collection and interpretation and decrease the possibility of researcher bias. Theory triangulation involved comparing interview data with two existing theories, Karl Weick's sense making theory (1995) and constructivism (Cobb, 2005; Kelly, 1963). Finally, the researcher utilized additional triangulation techniques, such as prolonged engagement, by conducting two rounds of interviews over multiple occasions with the same participants, and utilizing a focus group to check the accuracy of the data categories, properties, dimensions, and the emerging theory.

Results

To check the emergent theory for accuracy and to ensure that the themes were developed accurately the researcher presented the categories and the emergent theory to the participants in the focus group. The participants' responses confirmed the process element of their development throughout the first year. One participant stated, "I think it is definitely a process and not a linear one. Like I said, all of these categories are related and all apply to my experience." Another participant stated, "All of the categories are really interrelated and I can see how all of them correlate with my experience. The whole picture is really cool." Further, participants confirmed that students progress through a process in which they make sense and construct an understanding of their experience based on

four overriding categories: *affective experiences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization,* and *competence appraisal.*

Table 1 provides an overview of the categories, properties, and dimensions that emerged from the coding process.

Table 1

Category	Property	Dimension
Affective Experiences	Professor	Empowering-Disconnected
	Peer	Supportive-Lackadaisical
	Self	Positive-Negative
Meaning-Making	Professional Involvement	
	Motivation	Educational-Emotional
	Significance of the Counseling Degree	Personal-Professional
Knowledge Conceptualization	Source of Learning	Detail-Application
	Information Intensity	Low- High
	Information History	No previous knowledge-previous knowledge
Competence Appraisal	Self-Efficacy	High- Low
	Time Management	Overwhelming-Manageable
	Personal Expectation	Perfectionistic - Realistic

Table 1. Categories, properties, and dimensions derived from the data analysis.

As students reflected and discussed their experiences, it was evident that they had progressed and continued to move through a process whereby the four identified themes or categories (*affective experiences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization,* and *competence appraisal*) were integrated into an existing frame of reference. Moreover, as the students experienced their first year, the four overriding themes were used to compare present experiences with past experiences, evaluate experiences based on personal expectations, and attempt to establish an overall understanding of their experiences. This process was labeled the *constructivist sense making process.* The continuation of making sense of one's experiences was ongoing and continued to be revised and refined throughout the first year.

Affective Experiences

Each participant described affective professional and personal experiences that were influential during their first year. Properties within this category included professor, peer, and self. The professor property included two dimensions: empowering and and/or disconnected. One participant said, "She [the professor] has a lot of experience and just in my personal contact with her I get an idea of what it is going to be like to be a counselor." On the other end of the dimension, a participant stated, "I think it is difficult because obviously the different professors bring in their own experiences. If one is more experienced in a certain kind of counseling that is all you really hear about in class."

The peer property also included two dimensions: supportive and lackadaisical. Several participants discussed appreciating the support they received from their peers. One participant stated, "I really liked [learning from peers during group work] and it has made me feel really close to them." On the other hand, participants described interactions in which they felt that their

peers were lackadaisical and halfhearted about the program. This statement encapsulated the lackadaisical dimension: "I don't like an attitude though where people think school needs to be easy. I don't like intellectual laziness."

Lastly, participants described how they internalized feedback and evaluations and described how that internalization had influenced their first-year experience in the counseling program. This property (self) ranged from positive to negative. Consistent with much of the student development literature, participants relied on evaluations and grades as a way to validate their strengths with positive statements like, "wow, I actually know what I'm doing" versus, "that [negative feedback] creates a lot of anxiety for me and sticks with me for a long time."

Meaning-Making

As students reflected on the meaning associated with learning new material as well as gaining awareness into the multiple facets of the counseling profession, they obtained a more holistic understanding of their experience. Essentially, meaning was derived from three properties: professional involvement, motivation, and significance of the counseling degree. In addition to students acknowledging the importance of professional involvement with comments similar to: ("It was nice to feel that I was a part of a larger organization,"),students also discussed the educational and emotional motivators (motivation) that either brought them to the counseling program or helped them to continue in the program. Students also compared motivators to other experiences that were meaningful to them. One student stated the following: "I hadn't planned to take time off but I know I wasn't ready to go to grad school right after undergrad…Once I got into the program, it

is a lot more of 'this is where I should be'. This is what I want to be doing." Participants also affirmed the personal and professional significance of seeking a counseling degree; one such example included the following statement: "I never intended to go to grad school for a counseling degree but after time, things that happened in my life guided me. That time was vital for me."

Knowledge Conceptualization

Students conceptualized the information learned in the first year and compared it against what they expected to learn. They then used that information to make sense of their overall experience. Properties within this category included the source of learning, information intensity, and information history. Students actively strived to make sense of what they were learning and attempted to incorporate the new information into their existing repertoire of knowledge and skills. When students experienced a preferred source of learning, whether it was detail-oriented(A participant stated, "I would like to see how it looks in the field instead of what it looks like in a text book...I want real examples") or application based, the constructed understanding of their experience was likely to be more meaningful. For example: "I think the application part was unbelievably helpful...trying it was the best way for me to learn it, because if someone models it for you, you might just always try to follow the exact model and never be able to personalize it."

Students also revealed that the higher the professors' expectations were, the harder the students wanted to work, resulting in a feeling of accomplishment. In other words, as students were making sense of what they were learning, the way in which the instructor presented the material and the

expectation that the instructor had for the student was paramount to the students' willingness to want to learn. Students who made a meaningful connection to the material via the instructor's method were more likely to be able to conceptualize it, reflect on it, make sense of it, and truly understand it. These comments included statements such as: "I thought the classes would be, not more work but more demanding of me intellectually." Another participant stated, "I want the one professor that I can learn from for my practicum, even though she is one of my hardest professors." Finally, whether students had previous counseling knowledge (information history) was influential in how they conceptualized what they were learning. A participant stated, "I do not have any prior knowledge to hook onto and help me to really understand" whereas another stated, "A lot of things that we have learned, I can kind of relate to."

Competence Appraisal

Participants described the different ways they measured their capabilities and competencies based on their personal expectations and assumptions. Properties within this category included self-efficacy, time management skills, and their own personal expectations. Students' assumptions and expectations in regards to their future practicum and internship experiences affected how they measured whether they felt adequately prepared. Regardless of whether students exhibited high ("I feel like I can approach a person and really help them") or low levels of self-efficacy ("I have a really hard time transferring knowledge into practical application…so that makes me nervous"), students used assumptions regarding what they believed they ought to know as a way to measure their personal competence.

Similarly, whether students deemed the time consumed by graduate school as manageable ("I have learned how to balance my time with work") or overwhelming ("It is hard when you have to balance things, home life and school life"), descriptions were based on past academic situations as well as assumptions regarding the amount of time they expected graduate work to take.

Finally, students discussed their expectations with regards to personal abilities as first-year students. Not only did students construct a reality and overall understanding based on previous experiences, this category specifically highlighted the personal expectations component in making sense of experiences. Participants ranged from perfectionistic ("I expected myself to know more and know what to do") to realistic ("I really expected myself to try and focus more on learning and less on achievement"). Students' personal expectations influenced how they performed during their first year as well as played a large part in the overall ability to make sense of the experience.

Constructivist Sense Making Process: An Emerging Theory

Part of the triangulation process for this study involved comparing the data with two existing theories. Weick's (1995) sense making theory describes how individuals professionally develop by making sense of their new experience. Sense making is concerned with making retrospective sense of situations in which persons find themselves and is a process that is used to "construct, filter, frame, and render the subjective into something more tangible" (Weick, 1995, p. 14). Individuals in a social context interpret or make sense of new experiences by viewing previous experiences in new ways (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Additionally, the

process of sense making is fluid and dynamic. Sense making has no beginning or ending points and "people are always in the middle of things, which become things, only when those same people focus on the past from some point beyond it" (Weick, 1995, p. 43). The concept of sense making parallels constructivist theory in that it is based upon both developmental constructivism and social constructivism (McAuliffe, 2002).

Constructivism has been defined as the "notion that our beliefs and assumptions, many of which are theoretical and many of which are grounded in data, are products of the meanings that we make in our social context" (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998, p.77). Constructivism is a way of thinking that is based on actively creating a reality that is, or can be, social in nature, questioned, evaluated, and possibly reformulated (McAuliffe, 2002). Comparing the data with these existing theories served to check for consistencies and inconsistencies with the findings of the interview data.

This qualitative study sought to explore the experiences of first-year master's degree counseling students. Students' comments served as a basis for the development of a tentative, constructivist sense making process theory. In examining the overall theory, it became apparent that a variety of factors (affective experiences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization, and competence appraisal) were interacting simultaneously as students sorted out and made sense of their experiences. In understanding the constructivist sense making process, it is important to reiterate the process element of the theory and the dynamic nature of sense making. Figure 1 illustrates each of the categories, properties, and dimensions and how they are interrelated to the constructivist sense making process. In the theory, students develop personal awareness and make sense of each of the four

dimensions of their learning processes. The processes (affective experiences, meaning-making, knowledge conceptualization, and competence appraisal) occur simultaneously in a non-linear fashion throughout students' early development in the first year. Students continued to discuss their experiences and conceptualize information based on what they were learning and what, and how, they expect to learn the information. One student stated, "If I wouldn't have taken time off it would have changed my entire perspective on what I was learning and how I experienced this year. Your theory makes my experience make sense more and showed me how taking that time off influenced how I made sense of this year."

It is important to note the constructivist sense making process involved both individual and social processes of constructing and making sense of one's experiences. One student expressed the following. "I can see how I used my previous experiences…how my previous experiences influenced how I made sense of this year. I hadn't really thought about it that way before but it makes sense. It is really interesting." The application of the constructivist sense making process in counselor education curricula will further explicate the theoretical components and principles.

Implications for Counselor Education

In addition to increased insight into student-counselor development, this research facilitates conversation about how student development affects learning and the effectiveness of pedagogy that is aligned with students' developmental levels. With the understanding of the constructivist sense making process, counselor educators can understand how their students are using the newly-learned material, making sense of it and comparing it with previous assumptions

and/or experiences. vonGlasersfled (2005) suggested that a constructivist attitude might reveal "the realization that students perceive their environment in ways that may be very different from those intended by the educators" (p. 7). Therefore, asking students to provide written reflections on course topics or engage in class discussion are ways that faculty can facilitate the connection between the students' perceptions of the information and the content or message the instructor is conveying.

Skovholt and McCarthy (1988) emphasized that beginning students' "readiness" to learn influenced whether an event would be deemed critical in their overall development. The present theory provides counselor educators with awareness of students' learning readiness and how that readiness can be influenced by various pedagogical techniques such as giving concrete details and real world examples or applying the concept to a different, but similar, situation. Consistent with both constructivist theory and with this proposed theory, counselor educators can understand the processes students employ to make sense and construct their understanding of various experiences within the first year. Additionally, this information can assist counselor educators in gaining awareness into the need to process students' previous experiences and expectations and discuss how their assumptions may or may not fit with their current experiences. Woodside et al. (2007) suggested that counselor educators could discuss with students the idea of counselor development to help promote their professional self-awareness. For example, utilizing self-exploration exercises and connecting students' former experiences with why they chose to pursue counseling can facilitate increased professional and personal self-awareness. Several texts (e.g., Echterling, Cowan, Evans, Staton, & McKee, 2007;

Hazler & Kottler, 2005) have been written to help students learn about the journey that lies ahead. Such materials may be included as readings for courses early in the curriculum. This discussion could also take place in a supervisory context so that students understand how they are processing what they are learning and how they can apply the concepts in future clinical practice (Stoltenberg et al., 1998). In fact, the very idea of discussing the process of learning and how one's knowledge can influence future learning opportunities is another useful strategy.

This theory of students' experiences not only serves as a catalyst to examine students within their first year, but provides counselor educators with information that can be used to possibly revise and tailor curriculum and learning experiences to better suit the developmental needs of first-year counseling students. For example, in an Introduction to Professional Counseling course, faculty should provide more concrete examples of new concepts, while in second-year practicum and internship courses the examples should mimic students' clinical experiences and be more applied in nature. The proposed grounded theory provides counselor educators with an understanding of counselors-in-training on both interpersonal and intrapersonal levels, which in turn can assist counselor educators in designing appropriate educational experiences that help link prior knowledge or schemata to new information that can be applied in new settings.

Students expressed the significance of counselor educators' enthusiasm and willingness to provide a supportive and empowering environment for learning. Therefore, having discussions and sharing examples with first-year students, which counselor educators themselves found to be influential when they were early in their development, provide first-year students

with a context in which new material can be integrated. For example, one participant stated, "I can see how excited [the faculty] are to be in this field and how excited they get…It makes me excited to get out there and start my own career."

Further, as students discussed their experiences, they consistently stressed the importance of deriving meaning from learning activities. Obtaining meaning was achieved not only by students actively participating in class or experiential activities in which skills were practiced, but meaning was also attributed to the level of intensity that instructors and professors required in their classes. When students were challenged to "think outside the box" or study and apply concepts, students expressed feelings of accomplishment and contentment. Conversely, students complained when they perceived activities as meaningless or professors as being too easy.

This theory also stresses the importance of increased performance expectations on the part of counselor educators. Students expressed that learning encompasses much more than a didactic classroom environment and desired a setting in which students work together, were challenged, and were held to high expectations. Students specifically expressed their dislike of open book tests ("the [open book] tests I thought were a little bit too easy") and assignments that needed little rigor because they associated less meaning with easy assignments. One student stated, "Some of my other classes require lots of thinking, lots of active participating in class and I find that I learn much more." Also, students stated that when counselor educators presented materials in more creative, dynamic, and applicable ways, it strongly influenced students' overall judgment of the importance of the material. A participant stated, "I feel like the manner

in which the information was given to us was engaging. [The time] went by really fast because we were constantly doing things or talking about it and everyone was engaged and for me that is a really good way to learn."

Limitations

In spite of research bracketing and triangulation processes, several limitations exist and the results and implications for this study should be read with caution. A limitation of this study was the sampling procedure. While the researcher requested that department chairs provide names of students who they believed would be willing and able to clearly articulate their experience, as well as range in age, sex, and race as much as possible, several chairs expressed concern about identifying students without their permission. As a result, the recruiting primarily relied on volunteers who were willing to reflect and discuss their experience. After the first round of interviews, the researcher felt comfortable that the participants were indeed reflective and able to articulate their experiences and thus could be considered "information-rich". Also, there was minimal racial diversity between the participants which resulted in the data coming from a primarily a homogeneous group of students.

A potential limitation of utilizing the grounded theory approach is that the tentative theory generated in this research is limited in terms of generalizability. Further, the sample size was quite small in comparison to sample sizes in quantitative studies. These factors, though, are not appropriate for the methodology and do not follow the philosophical assumptions of qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). Information gleaned from this theory can lead to additional research and increased insight into student-counselor development

and can assist counselor educators to better meet the needs to the students in their programs.

Conclusion

An emergent theory outlining a constructivist sense making process provides insight into the experiences of first-year master's-level counseling students. To facilitate burgeoning counselors in the development of their own strengths and approaches to the counseling process and to strengthen one's own pedagogical practice, it is important to understand what takes place for students as they begin their journeys as counselors. Counselor educators are encouraged to explore myriad experiences of first-year students and to tailor curricular learning experience to provide the greatest possibility for self-growth and counselor development beyond the first year of academic preparation and throughout the counseling career.

References

Brendel, J. M., Kolbert, J. B., & Foster, V. A. (2002). Promoting student cognitive development. *Journal of Adult Development*, 9, 217-227.

Burnett, J. A., Long, L. L. & Horne, H. L. (2005). Service learning for counselors: Integrating education, training, and the community. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development*, *44*, 158-167.

Cobb, P. (2005). Where is the mind? A coordination of sociocultural and cognitive constructivist perspectives. In C. T. Fosnot (Ed.), *Constructivism: Theory, perspectives and practice* (pp. 39-57). New York: Teachers College Press.

Coleman, M. N. (2006). Critical incidents in multicultural training: An examination of student experiences. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 34,* 168-182.

Creswell, J. W. (2006). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Donati, M., & Watts, M. (2005). Personal development in counsellor training: Towards a clarification of inter-related concepts. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 33*, 475-484. Doi: 10.1080/03069880500327553

Echterling, L.G., Cowan, E., Evans, W.F., Staton, A.R., McKee, J.E., Presbury, J., & Stewart, A.L. (2008). *Thriving!: A manual for students in the helping professions (2nd ed.).* Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Eriksen, K. P., & McAuliffe, G. J. (2006). Constructive development and counselor competence. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 45*, 180-192.

Etringer, B. D., Hillerbrand, E., & Claiborn, C. D. (1995). The transition from novice to expert counselor. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 35*, 4-18.

Fong, M. L. (1998). Considerations of a counseling pedagogy. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 38,* 106-113.

Furr, S. R., & Carroll, J. J. (2003). Critical incidents in student counselor development. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 81*, 483-489.

Granello, D. H. (2000). Contextual teaching and learning in counselor education. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 39,* 270-284.

Granello, D. H. (2002). Assessing the cognitive development of counseling students: Changes in epistemological assumptions. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 41*, 279-293.

Granello, D. H., & Hazler, R. J. (1998). A developmental rationale for curriculum order and teaching styles in counselor education programs. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 38,* 89-106.

Hazler, R.J., & Kottler, J.A. (2005). *The emerging professional counselor: Student dreams to professional realities (2nd ed.).* Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

Hoshmand, L. T. (2004). The transformation potential of counselor education. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education, and Development, 43,* 82-90.

House, R. (2007). The be-coming of a therapist: Experiential learning, self-education and the personal/professional nexus. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, 35*, 427-440.

Howard, E. E., Inman, A. G., & Altman, A. N. (2006). Critical incidents among novice counselor trainees. *Counselor Education & Supervision, 46*, 88-102.

Kelly, G. A. (1963). *A theory of personality: The psychology of personal constructs.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Lambie, G. W., Hagedorn, W. B., & Ieva, K. P. (2010). Social-cognitive development, ethical and legal knowledge, and ethical decision making of counselor education students. *Counselor Education & Supervision, 49*, 228-246.

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2011). *Designing qualitative research (5th ed.).* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

McAuliffe, G. J. (2002). The heart and craft of teaching: What we know. In G. J. McAuliffe & K. Eriksen (Eds.), *Teaching strategies for constructivist and developmental counselor education* (pp. 1-25). Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey.

Nelson, M. L., & Neufeldt, S. A. (1998). The pedagogy of counseling: A critical examination. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 38*, 71-86.

Perry, W. G. Jr. (1970). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Ronnestad, M. H., & Ladany, N. (2006). The impact of psychotherapy training: Introduction to the special section. *Psychotherapy Research, 16,* 261-267.

Schon, D. A. (1987).*Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Sexton, T. L. (1998). Reconstructing counselor education: Supervision, teaching, and clinical training revisited. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 38,* 2-5.

Skovholt, T. M., & McCarthy, P. R. (1988). Critical incidents: Catalysts for counselor development. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 67*, 69-72.

Skovholt, T. M., & Ronnestad, M. H. (1992). Themes in therapist and counselor development. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 70,* 505-515.

Stefano, J. D., Mann-Feder, V., & Gazzola, N. (2010). A qualitative study of client experiences of working with novice counsellors. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 10,* 139-146. doi: 10-1080/14733141003770713

Stoltenberg, C. D., McNeill, B., & Delworth, U. (1998*). IDM supervision: An integrated developmental model for supervising counselors and therapists.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (Eds.). (2007). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

von Glasersfeld, E. (2005). Introduction: Aspects of constructivism. In C. T. Fosnot (Ed.), *Constructivism: Theory, perspectives, and practice* (2nd ed.)., (pp. 3-7). New York: Teachers College Press.

Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science, 16,* 409-421.

Woodside, M., Oberman, A.H., Cole, K.G., & Carruth, E.K. (2007). Learning to be a counselor: A prepracticum point of view. *Counselor Education & Supervision, 47,* 14-28.